4-10-00 INTERVIEW ORAL HISTORY - HURLEY, OSCAR

Oscar Hurley's early years were spent in Portland OR where he had his schooling and attended a private business college in 1927, studying business administration.

Most of his life was spent in the restaurant and hotel supply business, starting with the food business in 1933 and expanding later to restaurant and hotel supply, and the4 frozen food locker business in 1939.

He was married in Portland in 1932. He did not see military service because his business was considered essential to the war effort during WWII. "They took my brother, but not me", Oscar said. Liberty Ships were being built at the rate of one a day, Oscar remembered, with all the attendant pressures. He was furnishing produce and meat to the shipyards.

Oscar was a pilot and flew often from OR to So.Cal. during the war years. He established frozen food locker businesses in Pasadena, Glendale and Arcadia.

The Hurleys had a home in San Marino. Oscar's wife, Betty's health was adversely affected by the cold, wet winters in OR, so they were drawn to Sa. Cal. and radio advertisements from 29 Palms interested them while they still lived in Portland. Land and lot descriptions and prices sounded attractive, so they made reservations to spend some time in 29 Palms. There was a small airport there across from the Mission Inn. From there, they flew to Indio, and in Indio they heard about Palm Village and a small airport being developed by Hank Gogerty. "Desert Air" had a diagonal runway and at the end was the White Sun Guest Ranch. The Hurleys flew there and were met by an airport attendant, a man in a jeep with a large dog.(Dan Callahan thinks it may have been Jack Sherwood.) This man talked up the area with anecdotes and historic information.

Oscar decided to fly the whole area and he "fell in love with the Cove area, the range of mountains and all. "
The Hurleys promptly returned to San Marino, rented a trailer and came back to the desert to buy two lots. Moulen Investment Co. which was developing Palm Village was operating on the north side of Hwy. 111. (at that time it was a 2-way road.) There was very little on the south side of the highway. Moulen was advertising residential lots for $999.00, $99 down and $99 a month.

The Hurleys built a 10-unit motel in 1944 just across the street from where Jerry Malone's 76 station would go up in Late 1946.
Oscar flew a little Air Coupe, 75 h.p. with tricycle gear, to Portland, and often for the commute between Coachella Valley and Glendale/Pasadena. He could land anywhere south of Hwy. 111, the streets were blacktopped and there were few houses. One day Jerry Malone said "Why don't you park your plane at my station?" So Oscar accepted the offer and he said it "created a little interest."

Shortly after that, Oscar was building some office units and a man with a big bunch of rolled up plans under his arm stopped by. It was Cliff Henderson who explained that he was developing a resort to be called Shadow Mountain Club. "Cliff being a flyer too, we were congenial and hit it off," said Oscar. The two used to race between San Luis Rey and Portola, Oscar's plane against Cliff's Cadillac, recalled Oscar, of the fun days.

Bob Keedy was a good friend. There were only two service stations. Art Fields had Texaco and Jerry Malone had Union 76 - - - then Bank of America built across the street.

Betty did well, healthwise, but eventually they hired a manager for the motel and, subsequently, sold it.

In 1957, Oscar established a cable television station. He had the franchise for Riverside/San Bernardino- - the whole valley, except for Palm Springs. "My lawyers didn't move fast enough," Oscar said, with a grin.The business was called Coachella Valley T.V. Inc. and had only a few channels at first (Dan remembered 2-4-5-7-9) but after a couple of years it grew to 13 channels. Space was leased on Santa Rosa for antennas.

Oscar had an office in Rancho Mirage at the time and Harry's Barber Shop in the back was a place where

celebrities came for haircuts. Bing Crosby, Phil Harris, Bill Faye (Alice's brother) Basil Grillo (Bing's manager), Pete Petito and others. Bing was building five houses on Portola (Silver Spur where Jimmy van Huesen and others lived.) Bing lived in Thunderbrid Heights (then married to Dixie) and it was a favor to these folks to have cable service. "We needed each other, so... we got together," Oscar said. Oscar agreed to establish the business, Bing Crosby and Phil Harris supplied the capital. Phil Franklin of the Bank of America handled the financial arrangements.

Oscar worked so hard during those years, his doctor advised him that health was more important than the cable television business, so Coachella Valley T.V. Inc. was sold to a group of investors and became Abel Cable, later Media One, now Time Warner. After the sale, the city/county franchise was extended to include the Palm Springs experimental effort, so all was consolidated into one company.

Oscar built another cable system in Idyllwild which his son-in-law managed. Oscar has one daughter and five grandchildren, and now ten great grandchildren.

Oscar remembers those years of development fondly. He and Phil Harris joined the Palm Springs Elks Club. Volunteer work here (he had supported Habitat and other causes in Portland) included helping to establish an Information Bureau for Palm Desert, building the first church, non-denominational, on Portola and persuading Riverside County to provide a trailer for a Fire Department in Palm Desert. He mentioned Bob Keedy and Kay Olesen helping with this.

In addition to the cable business, Oscar was quite active in construction. He said he built "5 or 6 apartment houses on the north side, one of 25 units. Eunice and Ted Pearson were "very dear friends." They bought a unit in one of the condominiums. Their friendship dates from 1959.

The Hurleys moved over to El Cajon for a few years after sale of the cable business. While there, Oscar was active in the real estate business. He also belonged to a 7-member club of small plane owners. However , the Hurley's love for the desert never waned. Since 1976 they have been owners at Palm Desert Greens (lots were $5000) where Oscar shoots 88-90 on the executive golf course.

Oscar paid tribute to his wife, Betty, of 61 years. She was a true partner in both marriage and business 'til the time of her death in 1993. Oscar and Betty had good friends, a couple named John and June, whom they had known since their marriage in 1935. Johnny was like a brother, and Oscar first met June when she was 17.
Through the years, the couples were close and saw each other's families grow up. Oscar said he taught most of the children of both families to swim in the pool at their motel, Palm Village Guest Cottages. (accommodations were $8 a night, $9 with cooking privileges.)

John died a few years before Betty, so Oscar's marriage to June, now almost six years ago, seemed "a natural thing." The couple remains active, spending 6 months here and 6 mos. in Madras,OR. In five years of marriage they have done five cruises and in June they will go to Israel.

"Work and activity" is how Oscar explains longevity. He turned 90 this month. He has had four motor homes since he gave up flying in 1969.

From ten cent a pound hamburger of the depression to business success and comfortable retirement, Oscar has seen most of the 20th century and he's not looking to check out of the 21st any time soon. His father lived to be 96 and his brother made it to 102, he said.

Presently, the Hurleys are finalizing arrangements for 110 people, two busloads, "June has been working on it" Oscar said, to go to the Ice House in Pasadena for a theatrical production. The playhouse is a building Oscar built, near Lake and Colorado Sts.; one of the first projects he completed in So. Cal. After a fire, Oscar reroofed the building and leased it to partners for no fees the first year. They started their playhouse fifty years ago and are operating still, a pretty good run in anybody's language.

From: notes by Theda Lundquist

Dan Callahan taped the session
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Oscar's reminiscences included interesting anecdotes:

GAMBLING IN COACHELLA VALLEY

In the 40s and 50s vacationers who came to the desert usually stayed a week or two. The motels of the area gave out free tickets to gamble at two casinos, the 139 Club and The Cove, both located in Cathedral City.According to Oscar, Las Vegas interests controlled one, Reno the other.

Gambling was not encouraged for locals, but, principally, looked upon as a fringe benefit for tourists. After Earl Warren was elected governor of the state, gambling closed down permanently.

DECISION TO QUIT FLYING

When Oscar belonged to the flying club in El Cajon, three members planned a hunting trip to Gunnison, CO for the elk season.
I n Gunnison they hired a father/son guide team and, just prior to the season opener on Oct. 12,1969, it was suggested that they fly the area to locate the position of the elk herd. Oscar was the pilot. When they met at the airport, the younger man had brought his wife and little boy. They wanted to be on the flight so Oscar agreed, making five persons in the plane: Oscar at the controls, the father and son guides, the mother and child.

They flew 20-30 minutes , at 13-14,000 ft. looking for the herd. As they were coming in for a landing in Gunnison, the boy suggested they continue, to take a look at Elk Ridge. This required a steep climb back up; coming over the ridge, they encountered a strong down draft. The pull was so strong there on the mountain side, Oscar realized that he had to make a quick decision about a forced landing. Surveying the terrain below, he settled on an area of dried up pole pine (like dried grass, he described it) as the best possible runway in this emergency. For about 300 ft. skimming this vegetation, all went well. Oscar had them in position with heads down and he put on 10% flaps. They were coming almost to the snow when the plane hit a stump and flipped over into the snow. The canopy of the aircraft came off and Oscar was pitched into the snow. His glasses did not break but he did have a scratch on his head. The older guide suffered a broken arm, the young couple and their son were unharmed. Thus, they landed "safely" at 9500 ft and quickly had help as they were within minutes of their camp.